

## The Re: Are They Always Doing it Again?

By Andrew Bracey

Recently I was in the studio painting over William Hogarth's engraving of *The Laughing Audience*, whilst listening to an interview with Frank Stella on YouTube. I stopped to watch as Stella went to a blackboard on which he had scrawled the phrase, *Who are The enemies of art?* and below he had listed *Representation, Reproduction, Recreation*. Stella went on to say, 'Now there is one thing in common, it is the 're', they are always doing it again. And so I think the point of it is, that while I change and one thing leads to another, I am not interested in representing what I do, or reproducing what I do or recreating'<sup>i</sup>.

The Hogarth is part of a long running series called *ReconFigure Paintings* in which I paint geometric marks over the figures within reproductions of pre-twentieth century paintings. The eye alternates between my additions and the background of the original, something that is usually sidelined by the dominant figure or accepts my marks and that of the original painting as being one new composition. Stella's assertion of the 're' merely doing something again somewhat stumped me; was reconfiguring the same as representing, reproducing or recreating and something that therefore is an enemy of art? It certainly does not feel like it, and in fact a lot of recent art that I am drawn to has an element of 'doing it again'. My assertion is that something new and exciting can come from dealing with representation, recreation, reproduction, or indeed reconfiguring, as part of an artistic practice, something that is, perhaps, reenergising, reactivating and revitalising?

Over the last few years I have mused on a metaphoric position of the contemporary artist as a parasite. As with a biological parasite, the role of the contemporary artist (who uses existing material, images, other artists' work, etc.) is arguably in a non-symbiotic relationship with their source material, they do not give back and only take. The negativity associated with the parasite and perhaps my own uncertainty with this as a position, was confounded by Stella's position of the 're's' being an enemy of art.

My own belief in what artists do when working with existing material can be a more symbiotic association, more akin to mutualism. I believe that some artists are able to potently change, add or reconfigure something as a primary material or subject (that already exists in the world) so that it not only adds to our experience, potential and knowledge of the original object, but also goes beyond this to give back as much as it/they take. Importantly there is a dual way of seeing the artworks where the original object is still there, but the addition by the contemporary artist is simultaneously also present.

Douglas Gordon is an artist with a strong identification with the appropriation of material. His iconic *24 Hour Psycho* is seemingly a readymade in the tradition of Duchamp, not one image in Hitchcock's film has been altered. The most essential modification though (and this is perhaps Gordon's biggest masterstroke with the

choice of *this* film, by *this* director) is in the complete shift that happens to the pace, and thus the tension. The opening pages of Don DeLillo's novel, *Point Omega* describe the work expertly;

'He thought he might want to time the shower scene. Then he thought this was the last thing he wanted to do. He knew it was a brief scene in the original movie, less than a minute, famously less, and he'd watched the prolonged scene here some days earlier, all broken motion, without suspense or dread or urgent pulsing screech-owl sound.'<sup>ii</sup>

This passage describes how although nothing has been fundamentally added to, or indeed taken away by Gordon from Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the essential essence of what makes it unique and potent had been dismantled by Gordon's stretching of time and silencing of sound. The suspense of Hitchcock's film becomes a completely different type of anticipation in the hands of Gordon, amazingly through the same images in the same order.

However I am more interested in a different approach to appropriation of material, where the artist's own physical addition is visible. This might be something akin to a site-specific practice, where a piece of work is made about, and for a place, adding another layer to the site physically, as well as conceptually. The *site* in what I am trying to articulate is not a place, but rather an object (in the widest sense of the word). Artists can take something from the world to use in their art, add their contribution and put it back in the world, but with thrice the potential for meaning; a truly alchemical process. The viewer can still read the object for what it once was; for what the artist has added; and vitally in the interplay and interaction between the artist and the object. I am thinking here of work such as John Baldessari's uncanny transformations of photographs by the simple addition of circular price stickers or Bill Morrison's startling montaged films conjured from footage of decaying silver nitrate film stock sourced from archives.

Simon Starling has talked of the interweaving of 'meaning and making' and 'making and meaning' in regard to his practice and how the unpacking of the process of manufacture allows meaning to proliferate through complex, rhizomic narrative structures. Starling's 'nose' allows him to sift through the geology of potential starting points for a work with an astonishing ability to find something of existing consequence and connection in the rubble of unseen significances. He then folds further meaning onto a work by his own contribution, seen famously in works such as *Shedboatshed (Mobile Architecture No 2)* and *The Naging Particles*.

In a recent talk in Nottingham<sup>iii</sup>, Starling was at pains to make the point that the gap between how things look and how things are is significant. This perhaps gets to the heart of the point I am attempting to make; (good) artists can add to something that is already in the world (as an object, a place, a work of art by someone else) because they not only understand how something looks, but more meaningfully because they understand 'how' something is. Because of this they can both add to what is already there and unlock further meanings. Jacques Ranciere has extrapolated on this point

in his book, *The Future of the Image*. An image refers to two different things; one that produces a likeness of an original (though may not be a copy), but is 'simply what suffices to stand in for it'<sup>iv</sup> and one where there is 'the interplay of operations that produces what we call art: or precisely an alteration of resemblance.'<sup>v</sup> The alteration that Ranciere talks of is integral to my point and what I believe takes the sting from Stella's attack on the 're's'. Furthermore and, perhaps more complexly, I believe that the work I am discussing is able to maintain Ranciere's two distinctions of the 'image' simultaneously; to be both the 'stand ins' for the original and the 'alteration of resemblance' instigated by the artists discussed.

Nick Crowe's piece *The New Medium* features 15 digital messages written to recently deceased people on a memorial web site, which as Crowe says acted as "an early form of online cemetery"<sup>vi</sup>. The memorial sites provide a link between the bereaved and their loved ones, the digital world of the computer becomes a spiritual one. Crowe removes all the unnecessary 'chit-chat' from the screen to condense or purify the poignancy of the messages through the etching of each screen-grab onto glass. The messages are only seen faintly on the surface of the glass, creating a somewhat spectral presence at odds with the glare of many of the actual memorial sites. The message is, of course, brought into focus, by the introduction of light, where the resulting shadow of the etching makes the words clear. Crowe's translation of the personal messages posted online to glass somehow concentrates the grief and tenderness of the original posts, where it is coupled with the pathos of the attempt to reach out to those that no longer breathe with us, in a way that the internet is too multifarious to allow for, at least to this cynical mind.

Gerard Williams' *Cultural Currency* seen at Handel Street Projects last year comprised of two rooms filled wall to wall with shelves holding a number of wooden tablets. These each contained genuine bank notes from around the world, glimpsed through tiny shaped openings unveiling details such as illustrations, numbers and patterns. In this intriguing work Williams does many things, most of all to make the viewer look hard and think differently, as all good art does. I alternated between seeing the work in front of me and looking for/imagining the missing parts of the bank notes. I also looked at what Williams' *work* was in the piece, his remarkable selection of the details and the subsequent shapes on the tablets created their own constellations of possibilities. And perhaps the mind is most alive when these two things are combined to create a flickering and excitingly uncertain potential for new meaning; one that it is of mutual benefit and gain, for the currency, the viewer and for the artist.

To conclude I would like to complicate this a little by calling upon the example of the readymade, perhaps seen as the birth of the use of existing material in artwork and of the power of the idea over the craft of an artist. Duchamp famously selected a 'Bedfordshire' model urinal from J L Mott Ironworks in New York in April 1917. He signed and entered it under the pseudonym R. Mutt into an open exhibition organised by the Society of Independent Artists of which Duchamp was chair of the hanging committee. Shortly after its rejection it was photographed by Alfred Stieglitz and was then lost to time, probably thrown out as rubbish. In the May 1917 (second

and final) issue of *The Blind Man* Duchamp defended R. Mutt's *fountain* stating, "Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the title and point of view – created a new thought for that object."<sup>vii</sup>

Part of the work's significance is that the mass produced object had been selected by the artist to be art and placed into a different context. As John Roberts' has written, 'By transforming a reproducible non-art object into an unreproducible art object in the form of a reproducible art object, the logical relations of artistic labour and productive labour are exposed and inverted. A kind of commodity-madness is installed.'<sup>viii</sup> The value of this is further complicated by the fact that when we see *Fountain* in galleries today it is a meticulously copied, handcrafted object; one of a number of editions authorised by Duchamp in the fifties and sixties.

Despite Duchamp's assertion that whether the artist made an artwork or not does not matter, the fact that the readymade we see in galleries today is made by hand does seem, to me at least, an important and usually under-represented detail. In this example there are many layers of meaning; of the function of the urinal, its shift as a piece of artwork, of the legacy of the readymade, and so on. And then the information of the handmade version of the most famous readymade art object completely flips everything up again, it does something else and it does something more. I believe there is an irony to this trajectory of the work that Duchamp would have liked and where the only thing that was made with his own hand, R Mutt's signature, was the only thing reproduced badly in the new versions.

I am still not sure I am convinced by Frank Stella's maxim that representation, reproduction and recreation are enemies of art, though I am still unsettled by the possibility he may be right. Practically anything can be chewed around a bit and something new, something *interesting*, can come from it. Interesting or new does not necessarily mean it is good art of course. I wonder though if simple regurgitation is an enemy of art, to simply spit something back out again repeatedly without understanding it, akin to the parasite feeding off the host. This is perhaps in line with what Stella's point was, of not doing something again. An interesting thing about regurgitation is that it is not a proper 're', gurgitation after all is a surging or swirling motion somewhat unrelated to the definition of regurgitation. So ironically to regurgitate is not to do something again in Stella's line of thinking though it does in the sense of a dictionary definition. For me there is potent potential for the artist in taking what is already there and treating it differently or adding something unique to it, if that is the enemy then I will step over to the line.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9qL6XVtPZM> accessed 29/3/2016

<sup>ii</sup> Don DeLio, *Point Omega*, (London, Picador, 2010), p10-11

<sup>iii</sup> S. Starling. Simon Starling in conversation with Sam Thorne, Artist talk delivered at Nottingham Trent University, 12 May 2016

<sup>iv</sup> Jacques Ranciere, *The Future of the Image*, (London, Verso, 2009), p6

<sup>v</sup> Ibid, p6

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<sup>vi</sup> Email to author, 6/6/2016

<sup>vii</sup> Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds), *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000*, (London, Blackwell, 2002), p252

<sup>viii</sup> John Robers, *The Intangibilities of Form*, (London, Verso, 2007), p33